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ABSTRACT

Social exchange theory asserts that satisfaction is not the only factor that determines whether relationships last. Whether or not individuals are happy, interactions are evaluated using a comparison level for alternatives that describes the quality of outcomes judged to be available in the other partnerships. In this study, college students (N=137) provided detailed descriptions of their current romances that delineated their current satisfaction, and attention to and evaluation of the alternative relationships available to them. Subsequently, 79 of those people participated in a laboratory procedure in which they provided evaluations of specific same-sex and opposite-sex targets presented to them in pictorial form. The results suggest that satisfaction with a relationship and interest in alternatives to that relationship are substantially (and negatively) interrelated. Contrary to existing theory, happy lovers may be blind to attractions that would (and do) disrupt lesser partnerships. The grass may be greener on the other side, but happy gardeners are less likely to notice. (Author/ABL)

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Relationship Satisfaction and Attentiveness to Alternatives

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ABSTRACT

137 respondents provided detailed descriptions of their current romances that delineated their current satisfaction, and attention to and evaluation of the alternative relationships available to them. Subsequently, 79 of those people participated in a laboratory procedure in which they provided evaluations of specific same- and opposite-sex targets presented to them in pictorial form. The results suggest that satisfaction with a relationship and interest in alternatives to that relationship are substantially--and negatively--interrelated. Contrary to existing theory, happy lovers may be blind to attractions that would (and do) disrupt lesser partnerships. The grass may be greener on the other side, but happy gardeners are less likely to notice.

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Problem

Social exchange theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) asserts that satisfaction is not the only factor that determines whether relationships last. Whether or not we're happy, we also evaluate our interactions using a "comparison level for alternatives" (CLalt) that describes the quality of outcomes we judge to be available in the other partnerships open to us. If others promise better outcomes than we currently receive, the exchange perspective suggests that we are likely to pursue those new partners even if we are currently satisfied. Thus, if the "grass is always greener on the other side of the fence," romantic relationships should be marked by considerable instability as people defect from satisfying partnerships to embrace the exciting new passions of a novel partner.

This undoubtedly occurs. Lovers' commitment to romantic relationships decreases as their alternatives improve (Michaels, Acock, & Edwards, 1986; Rusbult, Johnson, & Morrow, 1986), and distressed marriages finally end when the spouses decide they can do better elsewhere (Edwards & Saunders, 1981). However, in clinical studies, explicit assessment of one's alternatives is more common among troubled spouses than in spouses who are very satisfied (Jacobson, Waldron, & Moore, 1980). Contrary to the propositions of social exchange theory, not all participants in close relationships may be equally attentive to the quality of their alternatives. CLalt may be less influential in highly satisfactory relationships than in less happy partnerships because contented partners may be less likely to seek information about their alternatives. In short, even if "the grass is greener," people who are happy with their own yards may not notice.

In a test of this possibility, the interrelations among relationship satisfaction, alternatives quality, and other relational variables were explored. It was hypothesized that, in a refinement of social exchange theory, increasing satisfaction would be associated with reduced attentiveness to potential alternatives.

Method

Subjects. Forty-seven male and 71 female volunteers from psychology classes at a southwestern university participated in the study.

Procedure. Subjects first completed in group sessions a demographic/dating history questionnaire that assessed their current dating status and satisfaction. It included a) Rubin's (1970) Love and Liking Scales; b) Hendrick's (1988) Relationship Assessment Scale, which assessed global satisfaction; c) Simpson's (1987) Best Alternative Partner Index, which compared the specific benefits obtainable from one's best alternative partner to those currently received; d) Simpson's (1987) Ease of Finding an Alternative Partner Index; e) a new Attentiveness to Alternatives Index, which assessed interest in alternative relationships (e.g., "I'm interested in having an affair;" "I have eyes for no else but my current partner"); f) a measure of Investments in the current relationship (Rusbult et al., 1986); and g) Simpson's (1987) Insecurity and Dependency scales. Cronbach's alphas were acceptable (ranging from .83 to .94) on all measures. The initial questionnaire also obtained further detail on subjects' current and past relationships (e.g., duration, number of past partners).

Thereafter, 74 subjects were invited to individual laboratory sessions in which they viewed several slides of print advertisements selected from various

national magazines, and recorded judgments of two opposite sex photos, a same-sex photo, and a product advertisement judged by pilot subjects to picture the most attractive targets.

Two months later, 119 of the original 137 subjects reported the new status and intimacy of their relationships; 36 of them were no longer dating their original partners.

Results and Discussion

Correlational analyses. Ninety-nine subjects were dating someone, cohabitating, or married. Pearson product-moment correlations among their relational self-reports, shown in Table 1, demonstrated that love, liking, and satisfaction were all negatively related to 1) subjects' attentiveness to possible alternatives to their current partnerships and to 2) their perceptions of the ease with which they could obtain alternatives which would compare favorably to what they had now.

Regression analyses. Since evaluation and knowledge of alternatives were significantly related to both love and satisfaction, stepwise multiple regressions were performed using attention to alternatives and the perceived quality of alternatives as dependent variables. As Table 2 shows, more than a third of the variance in attentiveness was explained by Rubin (1970) love scores. In general, the stronger one's love, the less one's interest in any alternatives. Three more variables contributed significant increments in prediction, demonstrating that those respondents who were especially attentive to alternative relationships tended to have had a greater number of past loves, were less generally satisfied with the current relationship, and had less to lose by ending the current partnership. Perceptions of the relative quality of available alternatives was significantly predicted only by satisfaction (Table 3). The more satisfied one was, the less desirable other alternatives appeared to be.

Discriminant Analysis. The relationships that had ended in the two-month period were compared to those that had continued in a discriminant analysis that assessed the ability of the self-report variables to distinguish between doomed and continuing partnerships. A single discriminant function was calculated, χ^2 (16) = 34.08, $p < .01$; it accounted for 100% of the variability between the relationship groups and was able to correctly classify 77% of the cases. Examination of the loadings of the predictor variables on the discriminant function, shown in Table 6, is illuminating. As social exchange theory would predict, a person's CLalt obviously predicted the future of one's relationship. Attentiveness to one's alternatives, high quality alternatives, the perception that they could be readily obtained, and a history of dating several different partners within the past year were all highly influential in differentiating the two groups. However, respondents' satisfaction and love also distinguished between the groups; lower satisfaction and lesser love were clearly characteristic of the relationships that failed. This analysis, like the earlier regression analyses, demonstrated that satisfaction and attentiveness to alternatives were not unrelated; both were instrumental in predicting the short-term future of romantic relationships.

Judgments of Attractive Others. Regression analyses of the subjects' laboratory ratings of the opposite sex targets revealed that the greater their attentiveness to alternatives, the more favorable their judgments of the slides. For instance, the higher their motivation to attend to other potential partnerships, the more their interest in meeting the models and the higher their estimates of the models' good looks (Table 5). Reported attentiveness to alternatives was thus related to actual evaluations of target stimuli in a logical, straightforward way.

Conclusion. Satisfaction with a relationship and attentiveness to its alternatives are clearly related. A refinement of social exchange theory may be in order. Lovers may remain committed to a particular relationship not only because other alternatives are less attractive, but because they are also rather inattentive to the alternatives that do exist. The salience of one's alternatives varies inversely with one's satisfaction, so that happy lovers may be blind to attractions that would (and do) disrupt lesser partnerships. Even if the grass is greener elsewhere, happy gardeners may not notice.

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Table 1

Correlations among the Relational Self-Reports of Dating/Married Respondents

	Love[1]	Liking	Satisfy	Invests	Insecure	Dependcy	Attenalt	Easalt
Liking[2]	.49***	1.00						
Satisfy[3]	.66***	.60**	1.00					
Invests[4]	.67***	.37***	.49***	1.00				
Insecure[5]	-.32***	-.47***	-.66***	-.18*	1.00			
Dependcy[6]	.79***	.56***	.80***	.58***	-.39***	1.00		
Attenalt[7]	-.65***	-.31***	-.54***	-.53***	.38***	-.56***	1.00	
Easealt[8]	-.66***	-.49***	-.72***	-.60***	.45***	-.72***	.59***	1.00
Qualalt[9]	-.39***	-.41***	-.57***	-.31***	.42***	-.56***	.51***	.50***

Notes. N =99. *** = p < .001. ** = p <.01. * = p < .05. 1 = Rubin's (1970) Love scale. 2 = Rubin's (1970) Liking scale. 3 = Hendrick's (1988) RAS. 4 = Rusbult et al.'s (1986) Investments scale. 5 = Simpson's (1987) Insecurity scale. 6 = Simpson's (1987) Dependency scale. 7 = Attentiveness to alternatives index. 8 = Simpson's (1987) Ease of Alternatives index. 9 = Simpson's (1987) Quality of alternatives index.

Table 2

Stepwise Multiple Regression on Self-Reports of Attentiveness to Alternatives

Predictor	R	R^2	Beta	F	p
Love[1]	.60	.35	-.60	73.82	.001
Loves[2]	.65	.40	.23	45.67	.001
Satisfy[3]	.67	.45	-.26	38.01	.001
Invests[4]	.69	.47	-.19	25.23	.001

Notes. N = 99. 1 = Rubin's Love scale. 2 = number of past close romances. 3 = Hendrick's RAS. 4 = Rusbult et al.'s Investments scale.

Table 3

Stepwise Multiple Regression on Self-Reports of Perceived Quality of Alternatives

Predictor	R	R^2	Beta	F	p
Satisfy[1]	.57	.33	-.57	46.66	.001

Notes. N = 99. 1 = Hendrick's RAS.

Table 4

Discriminant Function Analysis of Continuing versus Failed Relationships

Predictor	Correlation with Function	Univariate F (1, 116)	p
Attentalt[1]	.64	17.81	.001
Satisfy[2]	-.55	13.35	.001
Qualalt[3]	.53	12.17	.001
Easealt[4]	.53	12.01	.001
Dates[5]	.51	11.18	.001
Love[6]	-.49	10.66	.001
Insecure[7]	.46	9.09	.01
Dependcy[8]	-.45	8.57	.01
Invests[9]	-.44	8.45	.01
Sexual[10]	.44	8.41	.01
Liking[11]	-.40	7.17	.01
Partatt[12]	-.30	3.98	.05

Notes. N =119. 1 = Attentiveness to alternatives index. 2 = Hendrick's (1988) RAS. 3 = Simpson's (1987) Quality of alternatives index. 4 = Simpson's (1987) Ease of Alternatives index. 5 = number of dating relationships within past year. 6 = Rubin's (1970) Love scale. 7 = Simpson's (1987) Insecurity scale. 8 = Simpson's (1987) Dependency scale. 9 = Rusbult et al.'s (1986) Investments scale. 10 = history of sexual intercourse with partner. 11 = Rubin's (1970) Liking scale. 12 = partner's perceived physical attractiveness.

Table 5

Stepwise Multiple Regression on Subjects' Judgments of the Opposite-sex Slides

Predictor[1]	R	R^2	Beta	F	p
		Desire to get to know targets			
Attenalt[1]	.35	.13	.35	10.06	.01
		Physical attractiveness of targets			
Attenalt[1]	.35	.13	.35	10.06	.01

Notes. N = 79. 1 = Attentiveness to alternatives index.